



Women, power and dress in India: The politics of appearances

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Abstract

Often, one hears a saying: a child cannot know the alphabet unless she is able to picture the image of an apple when she says the letter A. Cut to the realm of politics, the image of a woman politician in Indian politics is one draped in a *sooti* (cotton) saree. It would not be an overstatement to say that there is a deep-seated relationship between women, power and dress, in not just India but also in the world across. This relationship largely guides the ways in which women are represented in politics; and this representation further guides if women are befitting for a political office. Moreover, this relationship does not end here. Even after acquiring power, the behavior of a woman politician is informed, amongst other factors, also by her dress. It is said that cinema is largely a mirror of the society we live in. The representation of women politicians seeking power in Indian cinema is also a testimony to these assertions. From *Aandhi* (1975) to *Thalaivi* (2021), it has not only been a portrayal of the rising women in politics and their quest to seek power, but also underlying this rise is a constant, though subtle, theme of the intersection of their dress and their quest for power. The saree, thus, is seen as an embodiment of power vis a vis women in politics. It is important to note that power here implies not only the power of political office but also that of resistance and protest.

This paper addresses these themes in greater detail and seeks to question the perdurable relationship between women, power and dress in the Indian context. It makes an attempt to problematize the femininity that prevails in the dress of women in politics in India.

Keywords: women, dress, saree, cinema, power

Introduction

Accounts of histories and world politics have talked of various dimensions of political power, of identity assertion and expression. But one theme that has largely been overlooked by these accounts is the highly important role played by dress. It was only after the 1990s that works on this theme have come to the fore (Roces and Edwards, 2007) [5]. But there is still a huge lacuna in these accounts, for they are mostly Eurocentric and fail to take into account the politics of dress as has come into play in the Asian countries. This is however strange for the simple reason that leaders and political representatives of these nations have always carried with them their identity in terms of sartorial politics, not just within their territorial boundaries, but also at international stage. While certain works have come up in the last decade or so that present an Asian interpretation, the Indian case is still missing. The case of India, thus, remains unexplored. While it may be too elaborate to take into account all the numerous cultural identities vis a vis politics of appearances in this paper, the focus therefore will be on the way this politics is being played out in regard to gender. Politics, fashion, and women is an interesting intersection, world across. The relationship between women and dress guides multiple things at once. It is about image projection, about how she is looked upon while taking public office, and like in most other fields and professions, is a major ground for criticism of a woman for not dressing up “aptly”, whatever that might mean. In the India context, this dress is most often, or rather, always a saree. While seen as a symbol of oppression in a patriarchy-ridden society, the narrative is a little different in politics. The ‘six yards of elegance’ as it is popularly called, saree, has become a symbol of power as well as resistance in India politics. One can hardly think of a woman political leader in India not donning a saree, in all its different varieties, representing their own unique identity, informed by different factors.

The sage of the saree: From Besant and Cama to Gandhi and Banerjee

The history of saree in India has been traced back to the Indus valley civilization in India (Times of India, 2019). It finds a mention in the Rig Veda. Moreover, sculptures that date back to at least 1st-6th century have been draped in garments, resembling the saree (Suri, 2020) [7]. Saree is, without a doubt, as aged as the Indian civilization itself. The history of the Indian freedom struggle from the 19th century onwards, records many a women who contributed to it. In the early days of the British Raj, one cannot forget the fight put up by queens of their respective kingdoms, Rani Chennamma and the Rani of Jhansi. The most popular images of these female revolutionaries depict them sitting on horses, with swords in hand, wearing sarees. But this may not be absolutely surprising, for the times these warriors lived in, that dress was probably the only dress donned by queens. But the important development occurs with the coming in of the 20th century.

With the national movement taking shape, prominent women took leadership roles in the struggle for freedom. Important to note is that most of these women who were at the forefront of these struggle, like Madam Bhikaji Cama and Sarojini Naidu, were western-educated women. Having attained their education from the city of London, they could have adopted a lifestyle, including a dressing style, similar to the West. But to be a part of the struggle in India, it was important that people who followed these women, considered them one of their own, and the image they present of their selves resonated in the larger womenfolk in the country. This was not true of only women freedom fighter of Indian origin but also of the likes like Annie Besant. The Irish woman, when took up an active role in Indian national movement, switched to wearing sarees. It was important to Besant, who was also addressed as *The Bari Memsahib* or ‘the Grand Old lady’ to display her love for her adopted motherland (Mortimer, 1983) ^[3]. And so she did while speaking in resonant tones at gatherings wearing a white sari, the attire of the common Indian woman. Moreover, it was not just the woman at the front whose dress mattered, rather also those thousands of woman who participated in the national freedom struggle, marching and protesting. These were not elites, neither educated in the west. These were women who did not need to “adopt” the saree, or convert it into a tool. The saree for them was that everyday garment that they took along with them as a symbol of their Indian identity. The women followers of Gandhi, participating in satyagraha, all wore khadi sarees. This symbolized their self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Throughout history, societies and cultures have, by way of their dress, asserted their identities. Whether it be the French Revolution (Wrigley, 2002) ^[10] or the Yellow Revolution in Philippines (Roces, 2005) ^[4], dress and the politics of appearance have surely played an important role in asserting allegiance to the culture. Sure, the culture is no monolithic entity, but the dress too was as vulnerable. The Indian national movement was also replete with this phenomenon. From North to South, and East to West, the saree for the Indian woman changes its color, fabric and design as it moves.

Today, female MPs in the parliament and woman political leaders across parties in India are not only known for what they speak and do, but also for what they wear. All these women, personifying power, draped in silks and cottons of all kinds, have created a space for themselves between an arena largely dominated by Nehru jackets and kurta pyjamas (Ahmedi, 2021) ^[1]. Saree became not just a national, but an international symbol of power, with India’s first female Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, donning the garment and going places. From Banarasi sarees to cotton drapes, Mrs. Gandhi created an image of an iron lady, albeit in a humble garment. From there on, a rich tradition followed. Her daughter-in-law herself, Sonia Gandhi, while not being an Indian national, took up to wearing saree as an important symbol to prove her allegiance to the national identity and to send a message that she is as Indian as any other woman residing in this country. Surely, this image paid her well for a very long time. Image projection by way of sartorial politics is as relevant as any other means of power acquisition. Down south, J. Jayalalithaa, the former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, is a case in point. Entering into politics from an entertainment industry required a complete transformation of image. Simply having a wide reach by way of being an actress was not enough. Thus, as soon as she joined AIADMK, Jayalalithaa tied her hair up and draped a saree. For her the saree symbolized much more than being a mere identity bearer. The assembly incident which involved her saree being pulled by her rivals changed the scene forever. Thereon, the Chief Minister began to drape her saree in a cape like shape, sending a signal to her opponents that the same saree has now become a protector, a symbol of strength and that she is no longer vulnerable. Mamta Banerjee, similarly, is known for always wearing the blue-bordered white Dhaniakhali saree, irrespective of occasions and places. It is rather hard to ever think of the West Bengal chief minister wearing any other color or fabric. She has made it her own personal brand (Ahmedi, 2021) ^[1], thus aiding and successfully projecting her image as ‘didi’. So had been the case with Sushma Swaraj, who was rarely seen without a jacket upon her saree, thus creating her own style statement. From Priyanka Gandhi, Nirmala Sitharam and Mahua Moitra, sarees have been the most popular choice for recent female politicians as well. A reason for this may also been, as a scholar has commented, that politics requires women to downplay their womanliness and femininity, in order to appear neutral. Saree thus remains a safe bet (New Indian Express, 2019) ^[8]. This also remains a factor for women who enter politics from spaces like the film industry to opt for the saree.

Politics, women and dress do not merely intersect in the corridors of the parliament and party meetings. Sarees also remain relevant as a symbol of revolution and protest, much after the national movement, to depict the struggles of women. The ‘Gulabi Gang’ is composed of such women. Started in 2006 at the Banda district in Uttar Pradesh, this women’s movement revolves about “punishing” oppressive father, brothers and husbands. Peculiar to this movement, are the pink color sarees. Breaking the stereotype associated with the color pink that relates women to feminine attributes of gentleness and passivity, the movement has created an image of its members as women who carry bamboo sticks while wearing those pink sarees. Sarees have also aided in activism in recent times. In 2015, Anju Maudgal Kadam and Ahalya Matthan, one a brand consultant and another, a perfumer, started the #100SareePact. The idea was to break the image of the saree as being a perpetuator of awkwardness, discomfort and impracticality and to let women narrate their stories of wearing a saree that included stories of empowerment not just of women but also saree weavers (Shekhar, 2016) ^[6].

Within the Cinema: Women, Power and Dress

The theme of women seeking political power has been quite popular in India cinema, since a long time. From *Aandhi* to *Madam Chief Minister* and *Thalaivi*, there is a portrayal of strong female personalities that go leaps and bounds to gain political office and seek power. But none of these films would portray the film character wearing anything apart from a saree once having entered active politics. The image of the lead protagonist is

instantly transformed from one wearing shirts, pants or dresses, to a cotton or silk saree. *Madam Chief Minister*, a recent film, allegedly based on the life of the ex-chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, depicted the main character as an outspoken, shabbily dressed woman with a bob haircut. With developments happening in the political scene, she's prepared to enter electoral politics and thus takes place an image transformation from an awkwardly dressed woman to one donning a tightly draped cotton saree and a *bindi*. The underlying idea is to project an identity that the larger populace relates with, and at the same time, one that conforms to the image of an aptly dressed Indian woman. Dress is thus an important facet while 'preparing' a woman to enter into politics and to stay, and films are a testimony to that.

Another film that reflects this phenomenon is the recently released, *Dasvi*. With her chief-minister husband put behind bars, the wife is unexpectedly put into a position where she must take charge of the husband's office. A woman whose life largely revolved around cow-feeding and managing the household wearing sparkly salwar-kameez, the character is shown to have undergone a change in the way she dresses, as soon as the demand to stay relevant as the chief minister arises. Posters around the city featuring her in pleated sarees and waiving are pasted to project her as the people's chief minister. Films have thus truly depicted the way women who enter politics must undergo change in their sartorial presentation. When Urmila Matondkar, the actress, joined the Indian National Congress and became, Urmila Matondkar, the politician, she took to wearing sarees on a regular basis. These women when seen wearing anything else are looked down upon for not projecting the image correctly.

Conclusion

Roces and Edwards (2007) ^[5] have described the dress as a form of a text. They argue that just the way any reader may decipher different meanings from the same text, a dress as a text may present a varied number of political agendas. Clothing and clothing practices in Indian politics for female politicians are also a testimony to this, as has been illustrated in this paper by way of various examples. Scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty have interpreted these clothing practices in a peculiar way, although not in a gender-specific manner. He argues that wearing of khadi by the politicians of today is a "site of the desire for an alternative modernity" (Chakrabarty, 2002) ^[2]. While since the colonial times, this particular cloth is seen as a marker of purity and poverty, it is an anomaly that it been used as a tool by our politicians that engage in corruption and deceit.

Women in politics in India have consciously converted the saree as a tool to suit their image projection and to further their political agendas. The same saree is thus sometimes used as an agent to strike a chord with the nationalist sentiments, and at other times to display class loyalties. They have quite strategically placed their dress at the center stage to create a space for themselves. It aids to impose their identity and assert influence, in the process of power-seeking. The politics of appearance in the case of Indian women politicians has been a game of image creation, projection and sustenance.

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